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WHEN THE WORST COMES TO THE WORST

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BY

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WHEN THE WORST COMES TO THE WORST

I

ALTHOUGH no life is without its vexations, burdens, and sorrows, there are many that escape the crowning experience of despair. They never know what it is for the worst to come to the worst. Often they find that the griefs to which they looked forward most anxiously are less terrible as they are neared. They are not impenetrable; they envelop us, but not with unbroken

blackness; a ray of sunshine strikes through and illuminates them. But sometimes this is not so. There are hours in many lives when endurance seems no longer possible. We are face to face with a blank wall, and the pursuer is behind us raging for our blood. Then it seems as if there were nothing for it but to throw up the arms and yield. To change the metaphor, every staff seems to break under us, and we go down to the bottomless pit. There are multitudes who never know so much as an anxiety about money; there are many more who, though never free from care, are yet far

from the actual knowledge of need. But there are some who live and see the whole edifice of their fortunes crash in ruin about them. Similarly, while there is a vacant chair at every fireside and an empty place in every heart, there are bereavements of quite a separate kind — bereavements which completely alter the whole life and the whole nature, and for which on this side of the grave there is no complete consolation. One personality may be so united with another, it may enter so intimately into every act and thought, that when its living presence is withdrawn nothing remains in life that is not more or less

touched with the pain of the separation. And while, happily, it is the lot of the great majority to escape the agony of public shame, it comes upon others, either by their own sin or the sin of those who are dearest to them. It is of such experiences that we wish to say something. Not much has been said or can be said. In its moments of profoundest agony the soul is for the most part silent, the grief is stony; it may find no relief even in sobs and tears. Afterwards the heart shrinks from any recurrence to its dreadful hour. Thus the expressions of absolute despair in literature are comparatively few. Perhaps

the cry of the heart when the worst comes to the worst is nowhere uttered so fully as in the Book of Psalms. Our desire is to say some words against despair to those for whom the long-dreaded moment has at last arrived, and who verily have seen the true Gorgon head.

It may be noted that the ultimate collapse is generally the result of accumulated sorrows. The heart makes a stout fight before it finally relinquishes its share in happiness, before it ceases for ever to have hope. "Misfortunes never come singly" is a proverb that has verified itself but too often. In most human lives,

it has been said, there are periods of trouble, blow following blow, wave following wave, from opposite and unexpected quarters, with no natural or logical sequence, till all God's billows have gone over the soul. There is in the universe a demoniac element which may break over us in any moment, and leave us in a horror of great darkness. One sorrow might be confronted and subdued, if the sunshine came when all was over; but when a man is lifted up and dashed down again and again and again, till he cries, "I reckon till morning that as a lion he will break all my bones, from morning till evening he will

make an end of me," he must find a refuge or he must die.

But for the worst sorrows and for the last despairs there are remedies to be found in time and truth. Truth must necessarily come before time, for the problem is, How is life to be sustained for another hour, how am I to bear this misery without having recourse to one form of suicide or another. The help, if it is to serve us, must come instantly, or the end is death. There is a help that arrives at the very moment when endurance seems no longer possible, and that is the belief that God is dealing with us. It may be, and it will be at first,

a dark and wavering faith, just enough and no more than enough to keep the soul alive. But if even so much as that is accomplished, conviction will grow. If there is a love that is constant, that is individual, that does not desert us when we cease to be worthy of it, that does not turn from us in our sharpest agony of pain, that is indeed most near, most tender, most pitiful when we are most in need of it, — that conviction and no other will bring us through.

Let it be remembered that this love is not merely an article of faith, but a reinforcement of the sinking powers of life. Divine grace, according to

the old phrase, is a real emanation. When no change has taken place in the outward circumstances, when everything seems an unbroken pall and sphere of darkness, the spirit, it knows not how, finds itself strangely nerved and succoured. It is helped through the very darkest hour, and secretly made aware that the worst darkness cannot last for ever.

Thus it is that time has an opportunity for doing its work. Of course it is true that this is but a convenient way of speaking. Effects are not produced by time, but in time. In reality, time does nothing and is nothing; it is used for the causes

that work more or less slowly within it, and without which no change could ever take place. Hooker says: "Time doth but measure other things, and neither worketh in them any real effect nor is itself ever capable of any, and therefore, when commonly we used to say that time doth heal or fret out all things, that some men see prosperous and happy days, and that some men's days are miserable; in all these and the like speeches that which is uttered of the time is not verified of time itself, but agreeth unto those things which are in time, and do by means of so near conjunction either lay their burden upon the back or

set their crown upon the head of time. Yea, the very opportunities which we ascribe to time, do in truth cleave to the things themselves wherewith time is joined. As for time, it neither causeth things nor opportunities of things, although it comprise and contain both." The consolation is that around us are healing powers and agencies; that our nature is not organised for permanent misery; that the good God above us has salves for our wounds, which, if we are only able to live through the critical moment, will in due time reach them and make life, if not happy, at least bearable. The assurance of

this is to be found in the records which anguished souls have left.

Before passing to speak of these, it is well to admit frankly that for some sorrows there is no cure in this life, and therefore in the merciful will of God the days are shortened, and the sorrow flees away in the sunshine of the other world; and so

> "No load of woe
> Need bring despairing frown;
> For while we bear it, we can bear.
> Past that, we lay it down."

Nor are agonies such as those we speak of to be easily got rid of. "I got over it after a time, and was as cheerful as if he were alive again, or had never lived at all," — this is the

story of many bereavements, but not of all. When the worst comes to the worst, the soul realises with a true instinct that life will never be the same again. It seems sometimes as if a new spirit had taken possession of the existing body when the true soul has departed. Many people live until they die, but many people do not. In Mrs. Oliphant's powerful novel, "Agnes," there is the most vivid expression of this fact that we know of in literature. The vitality that survived so much is at last mastered and disappears. Illness does not come; death does not come; duties continue to present themselves,

and are laboriously discharged, but life, so far as it is a matter of personal desire, satisfaction, and actual being, has ceased and stopped short. The sufferers feel that they have had their day, and yet much may remain of the hard tale of years which God sometimes exacts to the last moments from those of His creatures to whom He has given strength to endure. The new spirit that inhabits the form may be angel or demon, or it may be the most human spirit; but it is a substitute, even though no one may be aware of the substitution. The life which it was joy to possess, and happiness to continue, has been broken

short off, and has come to an end. Even when the heart is wondrously revived and quieted, and a new happiness links itself with the old — even when the wild dark sorrows show themselves at last as the fair enlightened work of God, we may find it hard to feel that the new days are linked with the old. But in God is the continuous thread of all our years, and we must boldly rest in the faith that there is a life in Him which furnishes its own health, its own wealth, its own good, and that the whole discipline of Providence is bent towards our securing and perfecting that secret immortal life.

II

WHEN the worst comes to the worst, there are perhaps only three ways of facing it. There is suicide, there is stoicism, and there is Christian faith.

Suicide includes much more than the determined taking away of life; everything that unlawfully dulls the sensibilities is in the nature of suicide. The first impulse in a great anguish is to seek something that will immediately still the pain. God has provided many remedies which he even presses upon us; but there are others

that mock us with a promise of relief which he sternly forbids. We must, in George Eliot's phrase, "do without opium." To fly to drink, or to narcotics, is to take the life as truly as if we plunged the sword into the heart. No matter how slow the benumbing process may be, it is the destruction of the higher nature, and therefore is in the direction of self-murder. Some are mad enough to throw away in the dark hour what faith they have, and persistently to refuse reconciliation. That also is suicidal. We read in the life of Richard Cobden that his boy, a lad of singular promise, when at school

near Heidelberg, was suddenly seized by an attack of scarlet fever, and died in the course of three or four days, before his parents at home even knew that he was ill. There was nothing to soften the horror of the shock. The parents had just received a long letter from him, written a few days previously, when he was in the best possible state of health. When the unhappy mother realised the miserable thing that had befallen her, she sat for many days like a statue of marble, neither speaking nor seeming to hear, her eyes not even turning to notice her little girl whom they placed upon her knee, her hair blanch-

ing with the hours. Mrs. Cobden never to the last submitted to the blow with the grace of resignation, and she never had the comparative solace that might have come either from religion or from reason. To the end she fought against her fate. The exercises of souls, after the great cruelties of life come home to them, must be looked on with solemn compassion. But suicide in every form simply means atheism. There is no need to enlarge on its cruelty, on its cowardice, on its folly; it is an action impossible to any who have a God in the world.

One of the most afflicting stories

of suicides is that of Haydon, the painter. He fought a long battle, in which he had little to cheer or console him. Perhaps there was only one period in his life of more than sixty years when his mind was comparatively unharassed, when he worked freely as to space and with a certain sense of relief from pecuniary pressure. Even then he had troubles from ill-health and other cares; but he had no antagonists that he could not overcome. He wrote to the Duke of Sutherland: "I believe I am meant as a human being to try the experiment how much a human brain can bear without insanity, or a human con-

stitution without death." Yet he surmounted many hours of bitter gloom. At one period he had to encounter the loss of his dear children, one by one. His sorrows were "something more than human. I remember watching him as he hung over his daughter, Georgina, and over his dying boy, Harry, the pride and delight of his life. Poor fellow, how he cried! And he went into the next room, and, beating his head passionately on the bed, called upon God to take him and 'all of us from this hateful world.' These were dreadful days." He had run into debt, and he acknowledged that he was madly wrong in incurring

his liabilities, but still kept hope in his heart of better times. At last, the arrows of outrageous fortune struck him by the thousand; every post brought him angry demands for the settlement of bills, threats of execution, and immediate prospect of arrest, imprisonment, and ruin. One by one his best hopes fell from him like dead leaves fluttering from a bower. His soul melted by reason of his trouble; his brain throbbing with fire, pondering over his past life, he confronted his deep love for his art with his broken fortunes, till, stung by the bitterness and the contrast, like a dying gladiator he determined on self-

murder, lest he should be left to languish in his agony. This is indeed a picture of human suffering under the utmost burden of wretchedness that one does not often see into so distinctly; and yet how clear it is that Haydon threw away the prospect of victory. He died in his sixty-first year, in the full vigour of life, and on the threshold of what appeared to be a hale old age. His affairs were by no means so hopeless as he had imagined. If he had taken the advice of the genial old Quaker who sent him one hundred pounds, it would have been well for him at least. "I do not, indeed, wonder at your anxiety,

and I feel for you. Look forward, however, with hope, — all may yet be well; keep your noble mind composed, — you may yet have plenty of employment. Be industrious, be economical, and you will yet be independent. Trust and hope."

It was an evil hour when he succumbed.

"Have I not had to wrestle with my lot?
Have I not suffered things to be forgiven?
Have I not had my brain seared, my heart riven?
Hopes sapped, name pledged, life's life lied away?
. . . . . .
But I have lived, and have not lived in vain."

He could have said all that, and if he had held fast to the gift of life and to his hope in God, he would have

looked back upon all his battles with the peace of a conqueror.

Sir Walter Scott was in every sense, and almost infinitely, superior to Haydon. Not very long ago the journal which he kept in the last burdened and shadowed years of his life was published in full. It merits in many ways the praise bestowed upon it by Mr. Swinburne: —

"Over all the close of a noble and glorious life there seemed to hang a dense and impenetrable cloud of suffering, gallantly faced and heroically endured, but pitiful to read, and in its progress and closing a lamentable graduation of collapse. Now we have a record not only of dauntless endurance, but of elastic and joyous heroism, of life indomitable to the last,

of a spirit and intellect that no trials could impair and no suffering decay."

We may well agree that Scott is himself alone, kind and true, brave and wise, single-minded and genial-hearted; and yet when the story of his trouble is carefully read, we cannot but perceive that he attempted to fight his own battle, and that, for all his splendid and magnificent gallantry, he collapsed.

Few men have ever been so severely tried as Scott. It must be remembered that, up to the period when the clouds began to gather, his life had been singularly prosperous and joyful. He was happy in his home;

he had vigorous health; his fame as an author was continually growing; he attracted the warm affection of many friends in every sphere of life, and his rich, enjoying nature drew pleasure from a thousand sources. All of a sudden the scene changed. He had to face pecuniary ruin, and he had to face it in its worst form. The disaster was not suddenly over and done with. If it had been, perhaps he might have borne it; but he set himself with unflinching determination to meet the claims of his creditors, and to the very last it was doubtful how far he could succeed. Then in the midst

of his troubles the darkest bereavements came. He lost his affectionate wife and his adored grandchild. His bodily vigour, which had seemed impregnable, began to give way; and last, not least, he had to fight with growing doubts of his own power to keep the ear and the favour of the public. To these blows he opposed, it is true, a good conscience and an unexampled gallantry. Nor was he without faith; for he was a firm believer in God and in the future life, and in our Lord as a teacher sent from heaven. More than this cannot be said. It is true of Scott, as Stopford Brooke says of Burns, that

he never seemed to come into any direct contact with Christ, and therefore never into direct contact with God. He endured, without repining, the calamities that came to him; but I do not remember that in his journal there is any instance of his asking help in prayer. He did not know that through Christ we have access to the Father, and that we may go boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help us in every time of need. In the journal where he unbares his heart, we never read of the High Priest who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, of the unseen

Lord and Friend who is nearer than the nearest, and never so near as when none else is found to help. He says at the first onset of misfortune:

"Came through cold roads to as cold news. Hurst and Robinson have suffered a bill of £1,000 to come back upon Constable, which I suppose infers the ruin of both houses. . . . My old acquaintance . . . died suddenly. I cannot choose but wish it had been Sir W. S——, and yet the feeling is unmanly. I have Anne, my wife, and Charles to look after."

He had occasionally wonderful rallies.

"In prosperous days I have sometimes felt matter vanish and power of language flag, but adversity is to me at least a tonic and a bracer. The fountain is awakened from its inmost recesses as if the spirit of affliction had troubled

it in its passage. . . . I sleep, and eat, and work as I was wont, and if I could see those about me as indifferent to the loss as I am I should be completely happy. . . . I am indifferent to it, but I have been always told my feelings of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, enjoyment and privation, are colder than those of other people. I think the Romans call it stoicism. Fortune's finger has never been able to play a dirge on me for a quarter of a year together."

Yet misgivings came.

"I have been much affected from morning by the Morbus, as I call it; aching pain in the back, rendering one position intolerable; fluttering of the heart; gloomy thoughts and anxieties which, if not unfounded, are at least foolish. I will console myself, and do my best; but fashion changes, and I am getting old, and may become unpopular. But it is time to cry out when I am hurt."

Later on Lady Scott died, and he says: —

"For myself I scarce know how I feel; sometimes as firm as a Bass rock, sometimes as weak as the wave that breaks on it. I am as alert at thinking and deciding as I ever was in my life; yet when I contrast what this place now is with what it has been not long since, I think my heart will break. Lonely, aged, deprived of my family, all but poor Anne, an impoverished and embarrassed man, I am deprived of the sharer of my thoughts and counsels, who could always talk down my sense of the calamitous apprehensions which break the heart that must bear them alone."

Afterward he says: —

"Everybody has his own mode of expressing interest; a mind is stoical even in bitterest grief."

Agere atque pati Romanum est. The months wear on in hard, incessant labor, and in the sternest self-repression this is wrung from him: —

"This is sad work. I begin to grow overhardened, and like a stag turning in pain. My natural good temper grows fierce and dangerous."

Then there is the anxiety about his grandson.

"Poor, pale Johnny! and he is really a thing to break one's heart to look at. I am afraid I am twaddling. I do not think my heart so weakened; but a strong vacillation makes me suspect."

The final blow was when he was made aware that "Count Robert

of Paris" showed signs of failing power.

"The blow is a stunning one, I suppose, for I scarcely feel it. It is singular, but it comes with as little surprise as if I had a remedy ready. Yet God knows I am at sea in the dark, and the vessel leaky, I think, into the bargain. I will right and left at these unlucky proof-sheets, and alter at least what I cannot mend. I have suffered terribly, that is the truth, rather in body than in mind, and I often wish I could lie down and sleep without waking. But I will fight it out if I can. . . . After all, this is but fear and a faintness of heart, tho' of another kind from that which trembleth at a loaded pistol. My bodily strength is terribly gone, perhaps my mental too."

By this time the end was very near; he had hardly another year to live.

To the last moment of his life he demeaned himself as a brave man should; but his heart was broken, and it was too late to rally. The battle lasted for seven years.

Contrast with this the experience of Silvio Pellico, the Italian prisoner. He had made himself famous by his tragedy, "Francesca da Rimini," when he was imprisoned for revolutionary opinions, and had to endure ten years of confinement beneath the leads of Venice, and in the dungeons of Spielberg. There are few more affecting narratives than that in which he relates the story of his lengthy endurance, and tells how he recov-

ered the serenity of his mind by the vigour of a sincere faith. In the terrible moment of awakening after his first sleep in prison, the thought of his father and mother came to him with incredible vividness. Hitherto he had not been religious; but when the terrible blow fell, he asked, "Who will give me power to support it?" and answered: —

"He whom all the afflicted invoke; He who gave to a mother force to follow her Son to Golgotha, and to stand beneath His cross; the Friend of the unfortunate, the Friend of the tried."

He sought God, and gradually his agitation became calmed.

"One day, having read that it is necessary to pray without ceasing, I proposed to begin seriously this unceasing prayer; in other words, to put away every thought that was not inspired by the desire of forming myself after the decrees of God. In less than a month I resigned myself to my fate with a tranquillity which, if not perfect, was at least tolerable."

He thought of how happy he had been in past days. Who had been more happy? He made friends with a deaf and dumb child. Every morning, after a short prayer, he made a diligent and courageous catalogue of every event that was possible, of every circumstance that was likely to move him. He rested his imagination with intrepidity upon each of

those circumstances, and made preparation for it; from the most pleasant visits to that of the executioner, he imagined all. True, he had very bitter moments, when, of all the things he looked into and felt, he knew not which was real or which was illusory, and he used to cry out in the fulness of his heart, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But through light and shadow he was in the end victorious. He comforted his brethren; he prayed for his jailers; he had no word of scorn or anger for his persecutors. When released from the prison, he met life with an unimbittered heart, passing his

days peacefully in literary pursuits and the discharge of pious duties, neither shunning nor courting honours, and keeping his spirit peaceful and sweet to the last, one of his final utterances being, "I cannot approve of intolerance, fury, curses, against any class of persons." This was a triumph achieved in Christ.

III

AFTER an overwhelming sorrow the soul's immediate business is with God. We can only "catch at God's skirt and pray." Where the one feeling is agony, the one thought must be God. When experience plunges deep into gloom, it is far less easy than might be thought to lay hold upon God and to enter into active communion with Him. More particularly in the darkness, which is the nurse of heavy thought, in the hour when the stings burn again

fiercely, we may feel that we are forsaken alike of God and man.

"I would lift my voice to God and cry ;
I would lift my voice to God that He may give ear to me.
In the day of my straits I sought the Lord ;
My hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing,
My soul refused to be comforted.
When I remember God I must sigh ;
When I muse, my spirit is covered with gloom.
Thou hast held open the guards of my eyes ;
I am buffeted and cannot speak."

"Sorrow, like a beast of prey, devours at night, and every sad heart knows how eyelids, however wearied, refuse to close upon as wearied eyes, which gaze wide open into the blackness, and see dreadful things there. This man felt as if God's finger was

pushing up his lids and forcing him to stare into the night, buffeted as if laid on an anvil and battered with the shocks of doom." He cannot speak, he can only moan as he is doing. Prayer seems to be impossible; but to say, "I cannot pray, would that I could!" is surely a prayer which will reach its destination, though the sender knows it not.

But this Psalmist, though he found no ease in remembering God, was able to turn his thoughts to the great deeds of God, and to hold by them. He went on: —

"Then I said it is my sickness;
But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High.

I will celebrate the deeds of Jehovah,
For I will remember Thy wonders of old,
And I will meditate on all Thy work,
And will muse on Thy doings."

Gradually by recalling the past, by thinking of how God shone upon us from the skies that we have left behind, we become reassured, and are persuaded that His glory will not be absent from the clouded heavens towards which our worn faces are set. To the Christian this should be far easier since Christ has come. "If I were God," said Goethe, "the woes of the world I had created would break my heart." The reply is that the woes of the world did break God's heart. Christ our Lord passed

through where the waters of sorrow ran deepest and chillest and angriest, and in His grief and in His sympathy we have the sympathy and the grief of God. In the crisis of our trouble it should not discourage us that we are dumb, and that the thoughts which should have brought us quickest and readiest solace fail for the moment to comfort us. Let us be sure that Christ is in the dark room, keeping the soul that is dear to Him alive, driving back in the darkness its most formidable and deadly foes. Let us nourish the thoughts of Christ's priestly suffering and His priestly compassion, and in due time the poor

heart will begin to unpack itself; we shall be able to speak to God through Christ, and the answer will come. We shall know that we are not calling to a deaf or remote God, but that prayer is verily heard.

Of course for a time, for a long time it may be, there can be no change in our circumstances; but it does not follow that because the circumstances must remain unaltered, no change may pass upon us. There may be an uplifting and comforting of the heart which we are altogether unable to explain. "Sometimes a light surprises;" some waft of joy reaches us direct from God, and

though it is by far too soon for us to vindicate the rationality of our peace, we are to remember that the peace needs no vindication, and we are to accept it as a direct and precious gift from God. Even if only the sharpness of the pain is abated, if the march of the slow, dark hours is in the least degree quickened, there is much reason for gratitude and for hope.

At first it is certainly best to seek no human alleviation or comfort except, it may be, the most sacred and the most intimate. Expressions of love may bring their solace with them, but it is not well that we should speak much at first of our great sorrows.

Expression is but too apt to react upon emotion, and to make the burden heavier. But when the response of sympathy is less complete than we desire, — and such it must almost inevitably be, — a new pang is added to our grief. There come hours in life when for the sake and succour of others we must recall the worst of the dreadful past; but, saving for these hours, the secret should be left with our God and Saviour.

Then as some recovery is experienced, as some strength creeps back, it is well to lay hold of what earthly helps and solaces are within our reach. Many sufferers have testified

that the most agonising time of their sorrow was not in the first weeks, when they were thrown directly upon God. It came when they returned to work, when they obeyed again the ordinary summonses of life, and when they realised with a slow distinctness and a dull pain how irrevocably everything had changed. For all this, it is best that we should go resolutely back to stand at our old post, however difficult, irksome, and distasteful the routine of life must be for many days. However sharp and terrible the recurrences of the pain, it is best that the mind should be occupied with honest labour; and for many it is best

that that labour should exceed and not fall under the ordinary measure. Innumerable sufferers have testified that the resolute and unflinching resumption of life and work repelled many of their worst foes and brought them back a certain rest, even though it was only the rest of weariness. Whatever can be done for the physical condition ought to be done. Perhaps more heed should be paid to the "hygiene of sorrow," for the suffering is physical as well as mental. No wise counsel of this kind should be disdained, and whatever lawful solaces God puts within our reach, we are free to avail ourselves of them. Times

of great trouble often reveal the meanness of human nature and the selfishness of much apparent friendship. The sufferer emerging from the storm finds himself lonely and in the midst of a desolation which is like the oblivion that waits for the dead. But often, on the other hand, one finds himself infinitely richer than he had supposed. A true affection manifests itself in many from whom he looked for nothing. It is wise, it is Christian, generously, unreservedly, gratefully, in the hour of our overthrow to accept what friends can do for us; and we should welcome with an eager gratitude the hour when "the low

beginnings of content" are dimly discovered. No sorrow should be nursed and cherished. Sorrows should not be despised, it is true; our business is not so much to get over them as to get through them; but there are some who encourage them and foster them, and deem themselves guilty of a kind of treason when their eyes are open to breaks in the clouds. All sinful, all cowardly escapes are barred to the Christian, but there are many which are open to him, and to which he is made welcome. Those are happiest, it has been said, whom a great sorrow strengthens while it saddens, and who can carry on the past into the present

in lonely fortitude. It may be so, but there are others in whom sorrow seems to be destroying the very power of love and the piety of memory ; and if there is opened up to them a new spring of happiness, they are to drink from it. As one has testified: "The whole history is something like a miracle legend, but instead of any former affection being displaced in my mind, I seem to have recovered the living sympathy that I was in danger of losing. I mean that I had been conscious of a certain drying up of tenderness in me, and now the spring seems to have risen again."

It may be, however, — it will almost

certainly be, — that the break in the clouds is but for a moment, and that the grey wrack again overwhelms the heavens. Once more, then, all that can be said is, " Hope thou in God ; " and perhaps this is the chosen message to great sufferers, the message which most surely brings them health and reviving. They must go on, but they do not go on in solitude. Christ is with them, and in due season not only they, but their circumstances, will change. The desert over which they travel will not be trackless if Christ is by their side, and perhaps there may come a gleam of brightness even in this life. With what pathetic insistence the

Psalmist prayed for this! We may pray for it too; we may hope for it; we may comfort ourselves with the records of lives that have emerged triumphant from sorrow into peace. All these things are lawful, but in the loving will of God it may be that our circumstances will not alter until we pass from this life to the other. On to the very edge of Jordan the path may be stony and sore for our feet, even though we drink of the spiritual rock that follows us, even Jesus Christ. In any case, we know that communion with Christ must persist and be perfected, and that the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom

of the Father, though no glory comes to them beneath these skies. Earth may grow grey and dim, its glories may pass away, but there remains for us a rest, "a region afar from the sphere of our sorrow," where every joy that was and is not shall come again, and come with no threatening of change, — the land where the amaranthine flowers are unwithering and all their sweetness unaltered as the great eternity passes. And so, even in default of hopes fulfilled here, we may be able to say, "I will hope continally, and hope maketh not ashamed."

We must try to gain from our sorrows, not only to emerge just alive

and just able to take some poor part in the fight. We must be more than conquerors through Him that loved us. It is not well to interpret our sufferings as judgments, as punishments for sin. They may often be these, but Christ on the cross taught the meaning and the blessedness of sorrow, and there is a deep and awful word which tells us that God scourgeth *every son* whom He receiveth. If there is no chastisement, the nature remains at a low level of strength and insight. It is the man of conquered sorrows who is everywhere the man of power; and when the waves are running high in our

souls, none can calm them as those can who have passed through the same tumult. There is no sympathy like the sympathy of a sufferer, no sympathy like His who suffered most of all.

Great sorrows never leave us what we were before. Then none can pass under that hammer and remain the same. But even if we are left without chastisement, something is daily passing from us, always passing, — that something which comes with youth and hope and love. After a great baptism of sorrow, we must be different; but what we should pray and strive for is that we may emerge

from it better, richer, more faithful, more helpful, more filled with a heartfelt delight in God's will, more able to make a true answer to God's surprises and wonders of love. The skies above us are at best April skies; our path will not be always smooth, even though we seem in the past to have suffered more than our share; but we poor men and God's wealth are stored together in God's pavilion, and the place where they are both safe is God Himself. We cannot be poor when close beside us are the infinite riches given so freely to all who need.

And let this be our last word.

There are periods in life, years and years, when no great trouble visits us. Then the storms of sorrow fall, and we are apt to say, I have passed through, and I may hope for an immunity for the future. It is not so. The troubles may come back, they may come back again worse. As has been said, our Pharaohs are seldom drowned in the Red Sea, and we do not often behold their corpses stretched upon the sand. The bitterness of death may return. What then? At the very worst, the memory of the past will help us. We shall retrace the slow, difficult way to peace; our trust in God will

be deepened, and we shall realise that, after all, the range of sins and sorrows is limited, though the sea of troubles may roll its white-crested billows as far as the horizon. What are truly numberless are God's mercies. What is truly infinite is God's love.

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